

# The Great Chicago

# Fire

Sunday evening, October 8, 1871, began quietly in Chicago. Some of the city's 334,000 residents were at church. Others were home and many had gone to bed.

In a small house on the Southwest Side, Patrick and Catherine O'Leary had a friend visiting. They talked about the things that were on everyone's mind—the terrible drought that had left the city so dry, and the fire on the West Side the night before.

Fires were common in this city built of wood. The previous night's fire was only one of about 600 that had burned the city that year. Yet people kept building wooden houses, wooden bridges, and even wooden plank streets.

The O'Leary's friend said goodnight. As he crossed the street, he looked back



and noticed a strange orange glow behind the house. Quickly, he ran toward the O'Leary's barn, shouting that Chicago was on fire again.

Meanwhile, the fire watchman on duty had also seen the flames. He told the fire-alarm operator to ring the alarm for Box 342. For some unknown reason, the operator sounded the wrong alarm, about a mile from the O'Leary house.

By the time the firemen finally found the blaze, it had spread through three blocks, fed by dry wood and a gusty wind. The firemen, exhausted from battling the previous night's fire, could do little to stop the hungry flames. Solid metal turned to liquid, and stone blocks crumbled in the intense heat.

## Did You Know?

It is not a coincidence that **National Fire Prevention Week** is the week in which October 9th falls. Though the Great Chicago Fire began on October 8, 1871, most of the damage was done on October 9.

## ANIMAL TALES

After the fire, a story sprang up that said Mrs. O'Leary's cow started the blaze. According to the story, Mrs. O'Leary was milking her cow by the light of a lantern; the cow kicked it over, setting the hay on fire. Mrs. O'Leary denied the story, saying that she always milked her cow in the daylight and never needed a lantern. Still, many people believed the story, and Mrs. O'Leary was treated cruelly by the press, who described her as a wicked witch. The real truth of what caused the Great Chicago Fire lies buried beneath the ashes of the infamous barn.



All over Chicago, people tumbled into the streets, clutching their children and pets and whatever valuables they could grab. Some paid car owners to drive them to safety; others fled on foot, trying to stay ahead of the fire. A terrified crowd headed toward the city's North Side, where they hoped the river would stop the fire.

When the courthouse was threatened by fire, all the prisoners were released, except the murderers, who were led away by armed guards. As Chicago's finest stores and businesses burned, owners and employees frantically tried to save what valuables they could.

When the South Side caught fire, it looked as though the whole central city would be destroyed. People tried to escape the searing heat of the fire by jumping into the cold waters of Lake Michigan. Ships' masts burned like matchsticks. A choking black cloud of smoke covered the area.

Above the smoke, however, a more welcome cloud was forming: rain! When it began to fall, the rain helped bring the fire under control. Sadly, the whole center of the city had already been destroyed. By Monday night, 29 hours after it began, the fire had burned out.

The next day, the people of Chicago surveyed their city. The fire had swept across 2,000 acres, turning 18,000 buildings into ash and rubble. Nearly 90,000 people were homeless, and around 300 were dead. Some said that Chicago itself was dead. Others disagreed: The people of Chicago were determined to rebuild their city.

On October 11, the *Chicago Tribune* published an article that said, in part, "In the midst of a calamity without parallel in the world's history . . . the people of this once-beautiful city have resolved that Chicago shall rise again!"

One year after the Great Chicago Fire, a new city had risen from the ashes. Chicago was very much alive.

Adapted from an article by Karen H. Dusek